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HOW BOOKING.COM'S BRAND IDENTITY COMPARES TO ITS BRAND IMAGE

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Abstract

This paper studies Booking.com brand's identity and how it compares to its brand image. Kapferer Brand Identity Prism (2008) is used to identify the main brand elements that build the identity. Once defined, the comparison with the customer's opinion is done using a sample of 12 Portuguese, men and women, collected conducting a qualitative research. The main brand attributes are not always equally perceived by the consumer. That is why it is concluded that in today's constantly changing reality, some of the brand identity facets are more dynamic and should be adapted to meet the new customer desires that changes over time.

Key words: Kapferer Brand Identity Prism; Booking.com Identity; Brand identity vs. brand image; dynamism of brand identity

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1. Introduction

During the group project it was seen that customers know Booking.com very well, that is why, in the brand equity diagnosis the brand identity acquired the highest rate (79%). However, as shown, the rest of the Customer Based Brand Equity blocks (brand meaning, responses and relationships) were rated lower than 50%. There is a difference between Brand Image, the customer's impression of the brand, Brand Equity, the value that derives from that image and perception the customer has, and the Brand identity, how the management wants its brand to be seen by its customer. Thus, how different is Booking.com from its customer's perspective?

Therefore, in the following work the main objective is to analyze the Booking.com brand identity to identify which are the core points that make the brand who it is and which are the attributes that could be adapted to meet the customer's expectations. To do so, the Portuguese market customer perspective collected during the qualitative analysis and the Kapferer Brand Identity Prism (2012) will be compared. This comparison will allow the identification of the main points of differentiation between how the brand sees itself and how the customers sees it so that some specific suggestions are given. The study parts from the premise that the Brand Identity concept is dynamic as supported by some authors (da Silveira , Lages e Simões 2010) so that some brand attributes can be modified in order to adapt to the new reality and to impress current or potential customers so that their brand perspective is improved.

2. Literature review

Brand identity is “what brand managers would like the brand to be, what the brand stands for and what makes it unique” (da Silveira, Brand Management - Brand Identity 2015). Establishing a brand identity helps the brand setting specific goals, defining its point of differentiation and positioning, and creating some timeless core values. From a business perspective it also helps defining growing strategies such as brand extensions or internationalization (Kapferer 2008:237-263), among others. It gives some shared goals and the

establishment of a common basis to start from in order to ensure synergy and consistency over time.

One of the first authors to introduce the concept of identity was Aaker (1996) who defines the identity as “what the brand stands for and a promise to customers from the organization members” (Aaker 1996 p. 68). He also considers it as the mixture of some core elements that represent the timeless essence of the brand and some extended elements, which complete the core of the brand. From a corporate perspective, the concept of brand identity was identified by Joachimsthaler and Aaker (1999) when analyzing the guidelines companies need to follow to develop a global brand. They believed that a brand identity is necessary to differentiate from competitors and create a strong internal company strategy. In the same line, Kapferer (2008) defines brand identity as “the brand’s tangible and intangible characteristics – everything that makes the brand what it is, and without which it would be something different.” (Kapferer, 2008:178). The concept has been developed to the extent that some companies have created their own Brand Identity framework: “Brand Key” (Unilever); “Brand Identity scheme” (Nestlé); Brand Essence Wheel” (Diageo); “360° Brand Stewardship Program” (Ogilvy); etc. (da Silveira, Brand Management - Brand Identity 2015:4) (Kapferer 2008:171).

To analyze Booking.com identity, Kapferer Identity prism (2008), an identity model with six facets, was used (See details in Figure I below). Booking.com goes beyond the offering of different services creating a deeper relationship with its customer. As explained, Booking.com customers consider not only their experience while using the brand, in this case the service, but also the afterwards, the trip itself, as part of the experience which in turns affect their opinion and perspective towards the brand. During the qualitative interviews, when interviewees were asked if Booking.com bring back pleasant memories (See Appendix II to read the Interview guide), they always answered positively as they associated it with the trip they have made. This brand identity model originated from the communication constructivist theory is applied to see

how Booking.com wants its customers to see them and how that view differs from the customer's one. The reason is that according to it, the brand needs to communicate by sending a message that is well received by the customers and that builds a relationship between the sender (Booking.com) and the recipient (the customer).

Kapferer Identity Prism (2008) six facets are divided into two parts, the external and the internal (See Figure I below). The internal includes the Physical, the Relationship and the Customer Reflection. The external includes the Personality, the Culture and the Self-Image. At the same time, Kapferer affirms that the Physique and the Personality help define the sender (Bookin.com), the Customer Reflection and the Self-Image defines the recipient (customer), and the Relationship and Culture form the connection between both sender and recipient as depicted below (Kapferer, 2008).

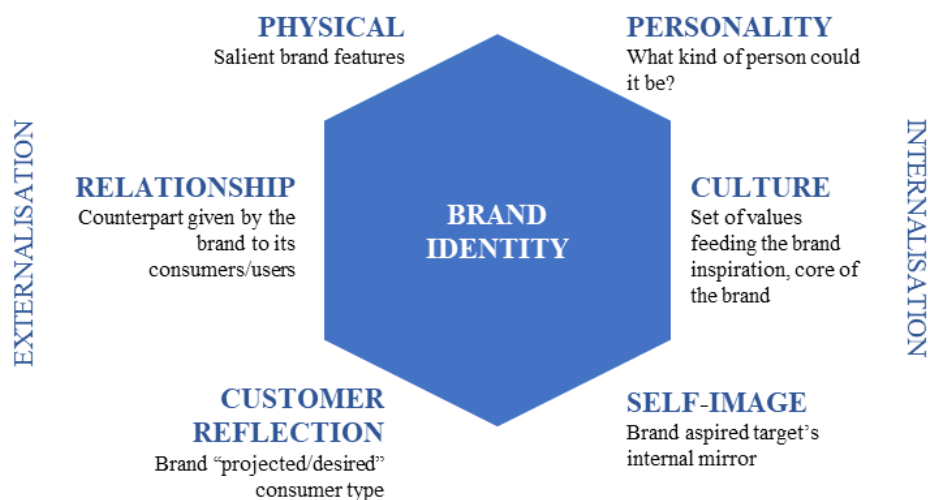


Figure I. Source: Made by the author referencing Kapferer, 2008:171-200 & da Silveira, 2015, p. 7.

3. Methodology

The present project is based on secondary data to define the brand identity, and primary data from the group project to understand the customer's perspective and compare it to the brand identity. The secondary data includes online and offline information from academic sources and Booking.com sources. The primary data, already explained in the group part, includes a qualitative research of 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews of Portuguese people (8 women

and 4 men between 23-60 years old). Some additional questions were asked in order to answer the present research.

4. Booking.com Identity analysis

Booking.com brand mission is to “make it easier for people to experience the world”. For that reason, their main objective is to keep growing to offer “a wholistic system that solves all issues of the trip” (Fogel 2018) as Booking.com CEO’s philosophy shows: evolve or be crushed. Its six facets are summarized in the following figure:

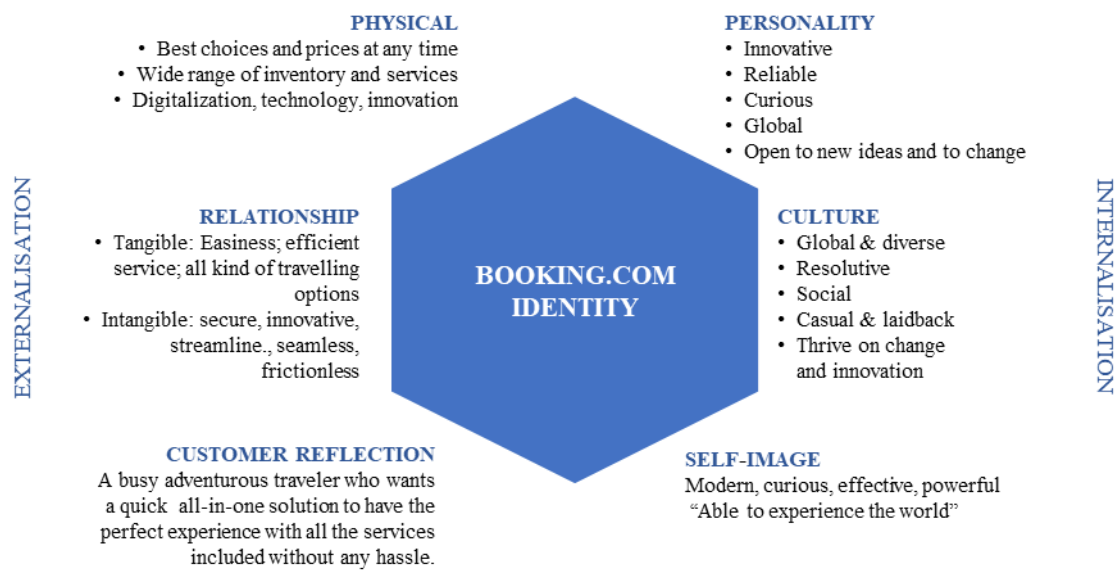


Figure II. Made by the author. Source: Booking.com, 2019 & Booking Holdings Inc. 2019.

When the brand identity is compared to the answers received during the interviews and survey, not all Kapferer Identity Prism (2008) is equally perceived. For the Physical facet, the main features the interviewees associated with Booking.com were hotel bookings and no other services, “I only use [Booking.com] for accommodation, never thought of it for another service”. Regarding prices, the opinions, as seen, are diverse, “I wouldn’t say is cheap, because miracles don’t happen. They don’t want to be considered a cheap brand, but it is a fair site with fair deals”. An interesting point mentioned by one of the interviewees was that even though they do not think it has the lowest prices, they still use Booking.com because of the experience as they preferred their site features and to have everything saved in their Booking.com personal account

or app. This last point coincides with the innovation and modernity of the platform that is present as part of the Relationship they give to the consumers. But the main point of difference is that the consumer usually think it is modern but not so innovative: “I don’t see a cool interface. When I’m logged in in my account there is nothing personal to me, there is just a pool of things”. According to consumers, there is a lack of personalization that is what would make them connect more with the brand.

Booking.com does a really good job in their advertising showing their Customer Reflection as someone adventurous or seeking an adventure, curious, who wants to discover the world and constantly evolving. They incite people to travel and use their site (See Appendix I to check two of their last advertising campaigns videos). In this regard, the customer perspective coincides as most of the people do see Booking.com reflected customers as they wish to be, and not necessarily as they are. On the other hand, when asked if Booking.com could be a person, who would it be, the interviewees opinion differs from the brand. They think of Booking.com as a middle age person, in his/her late 30s, very organize, reliable, very knowledgeable, and who is fast, efficient and does everything for you. Consumers associate Booking.com with efficiency and functionality instead of with technology and a great experience. “If you want millennials to be attracted, make it more appealing...improve the filters and the content to make it *sexier*” (Interviewee, 2019). An interesting finding was that since Booking.com was one of the first OTAs on the market people and especially younger generations such as Millennials and Generation Z associate it with something old instead of a trendy and groundbreaking site.

To compare the Brand Culture defined by Booking.com with the customer’s perception, the employees’ public opinion was considered. As explained by Marc Jansen (2016), Global Manager Learning and Talent at Booking.com, “There isn’t one single person who projects the culture of Booking.com; every single person and individual has a very important role to play in that.” (Qualitative interviews, 2019). Which it does coincide to the image given by the brand.

Finally, the self-image, how the brand wants the customer to feel, although it is similar to the perception as many respondents answers were the following: “This website makes me feel addict to travel”; “I feel it is fun using Booking.com”; “I feel secure”, there are still some points of improvements. Some respondents also affirmed feeling pressured or stressed and even annoyed by the continuous emails and pop ups that Booking.com sends. Although not statistically relevant, there was one of the interviewees that mentioned he felt stressed with all the filters available as it felt there were too many and not very well organized.

4.1. Limitations and further research suggestions

Some limitations of this research are found. First, one of the main limitations is the small sample size and the market of study. As this was done in Portugal a further research could be expanded to a larger region, such as Europe with a larger sample to be more representative. Secondly, this research focuses on the brand identity, however, a further research suggestion would be to also include the different studies and theories that consider the brand identity a dynamic concept and develop a new model.

4.2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Booking.com identity compared to the image consumers have is similar; Booking.com is doing a good job transmitting an image of easiness to travel and accessibility to everyone. However, as seen, there are some points of differentiation such as the self-image, personality and consumer reflection, perceived by the younger generations. This proves that in today’s dynamic and constantly changing environment, where technology plays a key role specially for Booking.com, there are some identity facets that should evolve and adapt to meet the new consumer’s needs. As stated at the beginning, the kernel of the brand should be kept to maintain the initial identity, but some brand attributes, as the ones seen, should be modified to improve the brand image which will make the brand stronger.

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Appendix I: Booking.com advertising videos

Live Curious campaign launched in Europe in March 2019

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2WK0EhXqdo>

Be a Booker Campaign in North America

<https://news.booking.com/bookingcom-debuts-new-be-a-booker-ad-campaign-celebrating-americans-that-turn-vacation-dreams-into-reality/>

Appendix II: Main questions used from the qualitative interview guide

1. Physical & Culture

- a. When you want to book a trip, do you usually go online or to a physical agency?
- b. What type of brand is Booking, which category would you place it? Is it a travel agency (general) or a hotel booking site (niche) or some other category?
- c. Where do you go when you need to book a flight?
 - i. Depending on the answer, ask: if the mentioned site (X) didn't exist where would you search instead?
- d. When do you hear about booking? Do you hear about it often? If so, in which situations? Is it a brand that comes to mind a lot? Why/why not? In which situations does it come up (e.g. does it come up when you want to check out a restaurant?
- e. To what extent do you think the Booking.com site has special features?
- f. Do you think it is a reliable site?
- g. What is it like to shop on the booking.com site?
- h. Is it easy to use? User friendly? (functionality)
- i. How would you describe their service?
- j. Are you happy/satisfied shopping there?
- k. How are the people that work there? How do you imagine the company culture?
- l. How effective is this brand's service? Does it completely satisfy your requirements/needs?
- m. How efficient is Booking.com service in terms of speed, responsiveness, etc.? (Customer service)
- n. Compared to other travelling agencies/competitors, are Booking.com's prices generally higher, lower, or about the same?
- o. Compared to other travelling agencies/competitors, do this brand's prices change more frequently, less frequently, or about the same amount? I really identify with people who use this site. Why?
- p. I feel like I almost belong to a club with other users of this site. Why?
- q. This is a site used by people like me. How come do you think so?

- r. I feel a deep connection with others who use this site, how do you feel that connection?
2. Personality & Customer reflection
 - a. How would you imagine Booking? How would you describe it as if it was a person?
 - b. Which words would you use to describe this brand?
 - c. Is this a brand that you can use in a lot of different situations? For example?
 - d. To what extent does thinking of Booking.com bring back pleasant memories?
 - e. Who do you think uses the service?
 - f. In your opinion, what type of person shops for experiences/other services except for hotel bookings?
3. Relationship
 - a. What is your overall opinion of this brand?
 - b. What is your assessment of the service quality of this brand? (Before and after purchase)
 - c. To what extent does this brand fully satisfy your service needs?
 - d. Does this brand offer good value?
 - e. To what extent do the makers of this brand//this brand understand your needs?
 - f. To what extent do the makers of this brand//this brand care about your opinions?
 - g. To what extent do the makers of this brand//this brand have your interests in mind?
 - h. How much do you like this brand?
 - i. How much do you admire this brand?
 - j. How much do you respect this brand?
4. Self-image
 - a. How does using this brand make you feel?
 - b. How do you feel when you first enter the site booking.com?
 - c. How do you feel when you finish your booking? And post-booking, before your trip or vacation? (Check if they feel secure and satisfied or not and why)
 - d. How does this brand make you feel?
 - e. Do you feel pressured or stressed when using the site? Do you feel confused? Do you feel annoyed?
 - f. How would you feel when booking a flight in the site?
 - g. What is it about the brand that makes you such a big fan?
 - h. Is there any other brand from this category you feel more attached to? Why? What is the difference with booking?